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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 001666

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SUBJECT: MU'ALLIM CONFIDANT ON BRAMMERTZ INQUIRY, IRAN
POLICY, NEW THINK TANK

REF: DAMASCUS 1368

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: Despite its attempts to project confidence, the regime remains concerned about the efforts of UNIIIC head Serge Brammertz, worrying that arrests of Syrian suspects and the formation of an international tribunal are on the way, according to Dr. Samir al-Taki, a confidant of FM Mu'allim. Al-Taki also described for Polchief signs that individuals connected to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) may have been involved in the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri, adding that Brammertz is apparently pursuing this line of inquiry. On a separate issue, al-Taki criticized Syria's current Iran policy, noting the heavier influence recently of Ba'ath Party Regional Command heavyweight Hisham Ikhtiyar. Al-Taki also detailed his success in establishing a new foreign policy think tank. End Summary.

12. (C) REGIME WORRIED ABOUT TRIBUNAL, ARRESTS: Dr. Samir al-Taki, a confidant of FM Walid Mu'allim, told Polchief in early April that the Syrian regime, despite its attempts to appear unperturbed, remains concerned about the UNIIIC inquiry led by Serge Brammertz (reftel). The regime is worried not so much about the inquiry implicating the President or his family as about the now-seemingly inevitable formation of a tribunal and a UNIIIC demand for the arrest of suspects such as Rustom Ghazaleh and his deputy, Jama'a Jama'a. Ba'ath Party Deputy SYG Mohammed Saeed Bukhaytan and Ba'ath Party Regional Command National Security Office head Hisham Ikhtiyar have been allied with SMI chief Asif Shawkat and VP Farouk al-Shara'a in trying to argue inside the regime and in the MFA that the SARG should resist these developments, asking the Russians for help. Al-Taki called such tactics futile, noting that the Russians have told the Syrians there is "no way" to sustain such a position, since it will make the SARG look guilty from the outset.

13. (C) Al-Taki indicated that FM Mu'allim and his allies (like MFA legal advisor Riad Daoudi and al-Taki himself) are struggling to counter this view. Interestingly, President Bashar al-Asad, who, according to al-Taki, has long stood inside the regime on the side of cooperating with UNIIIC, has expressed sympathy recently for this more confrontational posture. Al-Taki expressed uncertainty about whether this shift represented a temporary change of mood or a more significant shift.

14. (C) Al-Taki, who has been informally involved for months in helping put together the SARG's legal and diplomatic

response to the UNIIIC inquiry, insisted that Brammertz "has changed everything," including the leads he is pursuing, the way he is amassing the evidence, the way he is cross-referencing evidence, the composition of the UNIIIC team, "everything, except the overall theory of the case, the motives," which, al-Taki indicated, still point to SARG complicity.

15. (C) WAS GID INVOLVED IN KILLING HARIRI? Al-Taki noted that Brammertz seems to be pursuing an interesting new lead involving the activities of the Syrian "civilian" security service, the GID, in Lebanon at the time of former PM Hariri's death. Al-Taki acknowledged that SMI had a much more powerful signature on the ground in Lebanon at the time, but that GID, then under the command of Hisham Ikhtiyar, maintained active informant networks and carried out intelligence operations. Al-Taki said that both Ikhtiyar and a former GID deputy, then-head of State Security Branch Bahjat Suleyman, could find themselves targeted at the end of this line of inquiry. Al-Taki added that it is interesting that Asad has since removed both men from any position in this service, but did not make clear if this move was designed to cover their involvement or to make it easier for Asad to eventually sacrifice them to UNIIIC, if it became necessary. Al-Taki noted that Brammertz has asked to interview him and a few other Syrians on the roles of the different security services in Lebanon. (Note: Al-Taki is the second contact who has mentioned that Brammertz wanted to interview them for background on the Syrian security services activities and roles in Lebanon.)

16. (C) CONSPIRATORIAL WEB OR RED HERRING: Al-Taki said he believed that the two former GID officials, and Ikhtiyar in

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particular, may be tied to the killing of Hariri. They worked with a small group of former left-wing activists used by GID in both Lebanon and Syria. Two of the men were Syrians, Hamadi Abdullah and Daher Khalid, and the third was a Lebanese, Michael Awad. They continue to work in a research center/think tank in Damascus set up by Ikhtiyar. Before the assassination, they had been tasked by Ikhtiyar with establishing contacts with Salafist Sunni fundamentalists in the Tripoli area of Lebanon. Abdullah told al-Taki in the weeks prior to the assassination that Hariri needed to suffer "a terrible political blow, since he was the only politician who could threaten Syria on the ground in Lebanon." Al-Taki told PolChief that subsequently he had seen Abdullah the afternoon of the assassination, and he seemed so frightened and excited that his lips trembled visibly, interfering with his ability to express himself clearly. Al-Taki reported that Abdullah told him, "we did it," dropping hints that the SARG had acted through these Salafist elements to kill Hariri.

17. (C) SYRIA'S IRAN POLICY QUESTIONED: Regarding Syrian policy towards Iran, al-Taki reported that it was being shepherded by both Mohammed Nassif and more recently, Ikhtiyar, who was having a big impact. Al-Taki criticized the new policy orientation towards Iran, saying it was creating real fear on the part of the Saudis and the Egyptians. Both, but especially the Saudis, were indispensable to Syria's ability to protect its regional interests and play its natural regional role. Nassif's role has lessened somewhat because "his health is not good," noted al-Taki. As an aside, al-Taki noted that VP Shara'a continues to interfere with FM Mua'llim, quoting Mu'allim to the effect that Shara'a "is always sending his spies" into the MFA.

18. (C) NEW THINK TANK DESCRIBED: On a separate subject, al-Taki noted that he had succeeded in getting a new think tank organized. Unofficially affiliated with the MFA, and blessed by FM Mu'allim, the center is located in the Damascus suburb of Mezzeh. The institute would like to establish links with one or more U.S. think tanks. Al-Taki said he

would like to invite U.S. experts to participate in conferences he would organize in Syria and is also interested in tapping into any expertise or data bases they could offer.

He further noted that he is open to establishing contacts with think tanks across the ideological spectrum in the U.S. and would certainly welcome interest from think tanks identified with neo-conservative points of view, mentioning in particular The Project for the New American Century. Al-Taki's center has a small staff of young, enthusiastic policy people and can draw on Syrian intellectuals from across the ideological spectrum, from secular opposition activists on the left, to Ba'athists and Islamists.

¶9. (C) Al-Taki said the center is not for research but is being used to produce "decision support papers" and counter the anti-American positions and papers that Ikhtiyar and his group are producing for the president. Al-Taki said he hoped to get some "grant" money from the Syrian Chamber of Commerce, noting that the center "does not need that much money" at present. When told that he should pursue such contacts on his own, al-Taki said that he would but expressed the desire that the USG be informed about the center and his plans for it. Al-Taki said he also counted on some input from Israeli think tanks, like the Jaffe Center in Tel Aviv, with which he has had good personal contact in the past. In passing, al-Taki said that he had maintained periodic contact with newly-elected Israeli PM Ehud Olmert.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Other contacts concur that the regime is more concerned about Brammertz now than they were when he was first appointed, although most insist that the concern does not reach anywhere near the levels of paranoia and worry that were evident in the period between the releases of the first and second Mehlis reports. Al-Taki's detailed mention of possible GID involvement in the assassination of Hariri is interesting and echoes more oblique references he has made to us in the past about the possible involvement of Abdullah and others with Lebanese Sunni fundamentalist groups that could somehow have been connected to the killing. It should be noted that al-Taki confers regularly with current GID head Ali Mamluk. Only a very careful evaluation of the evidence by Brammertz and his team can determine whether this is a valid line of inquiry or a red herring. Regarding al-Taki's

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critical assessment of Syria's Iran policy, we have heard identical views from several other thoughtful contacts, insisting that the regime's Iran policy is misguided, dangerous for Syrian interests and risky to Syria's security if the U.S. adopts a confrontational posture towards Iran.

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